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ABSTRACT

Private-school choice or voucher programs allow parents to put tax dollars toward a private education--for example, in the form of a subsidy to the chosen school. The dollar value of a voucher is usually equal to, but may be less than, the state average per-pupil expenditure, and may cover the partial or full cost of a private-school tuition. This summary reviews the types of voucher programs that have been proposed, the status of existing programs, arguments for and against private-school vouchers, and research findings. Research on the nation's only traditional voucher system in operation, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, yielded inconclusive findings. A 1993 survey of California private schools indicated that the impact of vouchers would depend largely on the supply of private schools and their ability to make space for new students. (Contains 15 endnotes.) (LMI)

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ISSUES AT A GLANCE . . .

ED 392 133

Private School Vouchers

Kyo Yamashiro and Lisa Carlos

"Private school choice" or "voucher programs" allow parents to put tax dollars toward a private education — for example, in the form of a subsidy to the chosen school. The dollar value of a voucher is usually equal to, but may be less than, the state average per pupil expenditure, and may cover the partial or full cost of a private school tuition. What follows is a review of the types of voucher programs that have been proposed, the status of existing programs, arguments for and against private school vouchers, and research findings.

What types of voucher programs have been proposed? Voucher proposals vary in design. Some limit the number of students or specify a category of students eligible for vouchers (e.g., students from low-income families), while others may have no restrictions. Most voucher proposals require the schools receiving vouchers to participate in state testing programs, comply with civil rights laws and hire teachers who meet state certification requirements. A growing number of proposals would allow religious schools to receive vouchers.

Foundations, corporations and individuals have sponsored private school vouchers for low-income public school students for years.[1] Many of these privately-funded scholarship programs allow students to attend private religious schools and have recently been seen as an alternative to publicly-funded vouchers.

What is the status of vouchers? Milwaukee has the country's only operating voucher program.[2] But this year, voters in Ohio passed a voucher initiative,[3] and in Washington, D.C., Congress is debating whether or not to implement a voucher experiment in the coming year.

One controversial issue is whether religious schools should be included in voucher plans. Ohio does include them, but when Milwaukee moved in that direction this year, the Wisconsin State Supreme Court issued an injunction to temporarily halt the use of state money for vouchers to religious schools until the court's final decision. In the meantime, private foundations and organizations are raising money to help Milwaukee students remain in the religious schools they chose.

Despite predictions that the recent changes in political leadership would lead to passage of more voucher proposals, plans failed this year in a number of states including Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Texas.[4] Nonetheless, governors in Pennsylvania, Minnesota and Connecticut recently proposed their own voucher plans. At the federal level, analysts predict that a school choice demonstration proposal, such as HR 1640 authored by Representatives Weldon and Riggs, has a better chance of passing Congress than in prior years. Meanwhile, at the annual Christian Coalition's "Road to Victory" conference in Fall 1995, legal and political strategies were outlined for creating private voucher systems across the country.[5]

In the Far West Laboratory (FWL) region, voucher proposals surfaced in Arizona and Nevada, but did not make it to the full legislature for vote. Arizona Representative Scott Bundgaard withdrew his voucher amendment that would have reimbursed parents for private school tuition if they believed their children's physical safety was threatened in public schools.[6]

In Nevada, Assembly Bill (AB) 340, sponsored by Bill Harrington, would have allowed taxpayer dollars to pay for private education but failed in committee.[7] California's AB 84, still in committee, would establish a small voucher demonstration program in three districts within Los Angeles County.[8] This year, a leading California voucher advocacy organization postponed its campaign efforts for a statewide voucher ballot measure until the 1998 election.[9]

What are arguments *in support* of vouchers? Proponents argue that an unrestricted voucher program, one that truly allows for freedom of choice, would serve as a catalyst for improving public education. Unrestricted vouchers, they argue, will also give low-income parents genuine opportunities to be consumers of educational services. They believe that public schools will become more effective when forced to compete for funding with private schools and each other; those unable to attract students will cease to exist.[10]

Voucher supporters believe that public schools are hampered by too much government intervention. For this reason, some argue against placing too many restrictions on private schools that wish to accept vouchers. They contend that the same bureaucracy that has undermined public schools will then similarly constrain the effectiveness of private schools.

What are arguments *against* vouchers? Opponents maintain that vouchers given to students *already* attending private schools would reduce public school funding, even if no students were to leave the public school system.[11] They also fear that only those students who have access to transportation and information, as well as the ability to supplement government subsidies, will be able to fully benefit from voucher programs.

Some worry that the lack of an oversight mechanism to monitor participating private schools will mean far less accountability with no guarantee that all children are learning basic skills. Others challenge the constitutionality of voucher programs, arguing that including religious schools violates the separation of church and state.

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What are lessons learned from research on voucher programs? Research on the nation's only traditional voucher system in operation — the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program — is inconclusive. In its fourth year of operation, the program provided approximately 830 low-income students with $3,200 grants to attend any non-religious school in the state.

Wisconsin's state-appointed evaluator, John Witte at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, concluded that results from an on-going Milwaukee study cannot be used to infer the success or failure of voucher programs elsewhere. He contends that the student sample size was small, other voucher programs may not be directly targeted at the same group of students, and student outcomes are affected by a complex set of interrelated variables, not just the element of choice.[12]

Witte's fourth year report[13] also indicated neither positive nor negative significant results in student performance. While parental involvement was higher than in the public schools, choice families (compared to the average public school family) were generally smaller and more involved in their children's schooling before the voucher program. The study also showed that the initial student attrition rate (half returned to public schools) tapered off more recently to about the same level of mobility as found in regular Milwaukee public schools. Critics, however, have contested this and other findings in Witte's study.[14]

Although no voucher program exists in the FWL region, a 1993 survey of California private schools found that space in these schools was so limited that unless schools planned to expand their capacity, less than one percent of public school students could be accommodated.[15] These findings indicated that the impact of vouchers would depend largely on the supply of private schools and their ability to make space for new students.

As voucher proposals continue to surface, it will be important to track the emerging court decisions and interpretations thereof. Emerging research may also lend clarity to some of the more controversial elements contributing to the political debate over private school vouchers. Across the country people will undoubtedly be watching to see how voucher programs already in place evolve and what lessons can be learned from their experiences.

Endnotes

[1] For more information on private scholarship programs, see Miller, L. (1995, September 13). Couple gives $25 million for Catholic school vouchers. *Education Week*, p. 5; and *Choice opportunities: Private scholarship programs* by the Center for Education Reform (Washington, D.C.).

[2] The only traditional voucher program is in Milwaukee, although since 1894, Vermont has provided students with subsidies to attend any schools, including private, if they are in isolated rural areas. Puerto Rico also enacted a voucher program in 1993 which serves over 16,000 students. A Supreme Court case decision in 1994 determined that inclusion of private religious schools in the program was unconstitutional; the case is now being appealed. See: Center for Education Reform. (1995, Winter). *School reform in the United States: State by State Summary*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

[3] Ohio's original legislative proposal failed, but a voucher demonstration program to be piloted in Cleveland was added into the budget proposal, which was signed on June 30, 1995, by the governor.

[4] Richardson, J. (1995, November 29). Minn. governor unveils private school voucher plan. *Education Week*, p. 13.

[5] Reporter's notebook. (1995, September 20). *Education Week*, p. 7.

[6] Legislature in brief. (1995, April 5). *The Arizona Republic*.

[7] Bremner, F. (1995, April 5). Private school aid bill stuck in committee. *Reno Gazette-Journal*.

[8] To date, Assembly Bill (AB) 84, authored by Murray, is still in committee.

[9] Lindsay, D. (1995, September 6). With voters lukewarm, California group shelves voucher initiative until 1998 election. *Education Week*.

[10] For a more in-depth discussion of markets in education, see: Moe, T.M. & Chubb, J.E. (1990). *Politics, markets and America's schools*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute.

[11] California Department of Education. (1993, May 14). *Analysis of the Parental Choice in Education Initiative* (Attachment B). This analysis pointed out that "each student who leaves the public schools to redeem a scholarship reduces public school funding twice. First, when he leaves, and a second time when his scholarship and 'savings' are counted in satisfaction of the (reduced) state obligation to fund public schools."

[12] Lindsay, D. (1994, December 14). Wisconsin blocking voucher data, researcher says. *Education Week*, p.14.

[13] Witte, J.F., et al. (1994). *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Fourth year report*. Madison: University of Wisconsin.

[14] Petersen, P. (1995). *Critique of the Witte evaluation of Milwaukee's School Choice Program*. Cambridge: Harvard University: Center for American Political Studies.

[15] Dianda, M.R. & Corwin, R.G. (1993). *What a voucher could buy. A survey of California's private schools*. Los Alamitos, CA: Southwest Regional Laboratory. This study is based upon a survey of California's private schools. Certain schools characterize themselves in the survey as more receptive to vouchers. Of these voucher-receptive schools, more than 70 percent are operating at almost full capacity (85 percent). Given this information, the report estimates that private schools in California could accommodate less than one percent of California's public school population, unless they expanded their capacity. Almost half of the private schools that would accept vouchers also plan to increase capacity in the form of additional teaching staff, increasing classroom space, and diversifying courses of study.

Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development serves the four state region of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, working with educators at all levels to plan and carry out school improvements. As of December 1, 1995, FWL has joined with SWRL to create a new agency called WestEd, to better serve the education communities.

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